Chartering New Scottish Rite Blue Lodges in the United States

Challenges, Benefits, and Paths Forward

Abstract This research paper undertakes an extensive examination of the complex process involved in establishing new Scottish Rite lodges under the authority of mainstream American Grand Lodges. The history and development of Freemasonry in the US is reviewed to provide context around the dominance of the York Rite ritual tradition and institutional resistance to alternate rites.

The origins and expansion of Scottish Rite Masonry internationally and in America is explored as background. Regulations and procedures for constituting new lodges are analyzed, with additional considerations for Scottish Rite lodges delineated. Arguments are presented on the practical merits and philosophical principles that support permitting greater diversity in Masonic ritual. Political barriers are acknowledged, with strategies offered for overcoming resistance from those wedded to universal conformity. Approaches for advocating change through Masonic legislation are suggested. Ultimately, a measured assessment is synthesized to educate and equip those pursuing the aim of integrating Scottish Rite ritual more widely at the local lodge level. Despite challenges, this represents an opportunity for the thoughtful inclusion of esoteric diversity to strengthen American Freemasonry.

Introduction Freemasonry has proven itself adaptable to different cultures and contexts globally while maintaining its essential character. Yet American Freemasons have historically resisted incorporating alternate rituals, resulting in many Grand Lodges restricting lodges solely to York Rite practice. This research examines avenues for expanding acceptance of the Scottish Rite craft degrees system, given its merits and masonic legitimacy. The intricacy of navigating institutional barriers and overcoming embedded cultural uniformity is acknowledged. Still, thoughtful analysis provides insights for advancing the cause of ritual pluralism. Blending international perspectives allows American Masonry to evolve while upholding its principles.

Background on Development of American Freemasonry Modern speculative Freemasonry originated in Britain in the early 18th century before spreading abroad. The first colonial American lodges were constituted under charters granted by the Grand Lodges of England, Ireland, and Scotland. After the Revolutionary War, American Masons sought to establish sovereignty separate from European control. Independent state grand lodges were rapidly constituted across the former colonies.

With decentralized authority came the dilemma of consistency. American grand lodges adopted the precedent of exclusive territorial jurisdiction limiting one sovereign body per state.

They also pursued ritual uniformity, facilitated by the fact most descended from England's Premier Grand Lodge of 1717 which promulgated its rituals among daughter lodges. Through a series of Masonic conventions in the early 19th century, the York Rite ritual was selected as the standard for American lodges.

The Webb-Preston variant of York Rite specifically was promoted as the model in American Masonry's formative period. By the 1820s, the vast majority of U.S. grand lodges recognized it as the legal ritual. The singular exception was Louisiana, where a preexisting mixture of French rites persisted. Tensions erupted between Louisiana's pluralism and desires to enforce conformity elsewhere, but ultimately a grudging live-and-let-live truce emerged. The 1860s saw the last serious attempt to force Louisiana to abandon ritual diversity. Outside of Louisiana, though, the Webb-Preston York Rite became indelibly fixed as the defining mode of American Craft Masonry for over a century.

Introduction and Growth of Scottish Rite Masonry The Scottish Rite emerged in France in the mid-18th century, consisting of elaborate ritual dramas and legend conveying Masonic teachings in degrees numbered 4 through 32. It spread across Europe and was first brought to America around 1802. The first Supreme Council overseeing Scottish Rite in the Western hemisphere was established in Charleston in 1801.

Throughout the 1800s, Scottish Rite bodies known as Valleys were constituted across the United States in most major cities. For generations, Scottish Rite existed parallel to mainline Masonry without overlapping. The York Rite state grand lodges governed the first three symbolic lodge degrees, while Scottish Rite offered a supplementary system of higher degrees controlled by Supreme Councils.

In this structure, the Scottish Rite explicitly did not confer the first three craft degrees, and accepted candidates typically after they had received the Master Mason degree. But in the early 1900s, this demarcation evolved as the Supreme Council NMJ began revising the Scottish Rite craft degrees.

The emphasis was on incorporating dramatic allegory and visual spectacle to amplify their impact. Proponents believed integrating Scottish Rite rituals for the foundational craft lodges could enhance engagement and education for candidates.

This revised Scottish Rite craft system spread internationally but faced obstacles in America. Only Louisiana had a historical tradition of Scottish Rite blue lodges, dating back to 1846.

A few other U.S. jurisdictions like New Mexico, New Jersey, and Massachusetts permitted limited use. But widespread adoption was hampered by the entrenched success of York Rite ritual as the mandatory standard.

In recent decades, though, shrinking membership and lack of engagement have led more American Masons to show interest in diversifying ritual options. However serious procedural, political, and cultural barriers exist to fully expanding access to the Scottish Rite craft degrees in the U.S.

Requirements for Chartering New Lodges The policies and steps for establishing a new lodge differ between jurisdictions but generally contain commonalities. The standard framework is:

- Acquire the mandated minimum number of Master Masons, often set at seven or more.

- Prepare a petition detailing the new lodge name, location, meeting place, slate of officers, and other information required by the particular grand lodge.

- Submit the petition to the Grand Lodge Committee on Lodges Under Dispensation for review.

- If recommended by committee, the request goes to a full vote at the Annual Grand Communication. Between Communications, a provisional dispensation may be granted by the Grand Master.

- If approved, the new lodge works under dispensation for a preliminary 1-2 year period before receiving a full charter.

- A grand lodge inspecting committee visits the lodge under dispensation before deciding if they merit recommendation for a permanent charter.

- At the next Annual Communication, a vote on granting a charter occurs, if successful completing the constitution process.

For a Scottish Rite lodge additional steps include:

- Acquiring authorized copies of the current Scottish Rite craft ritual monitor.
- Gaining approval from the grand lodge to practice Scottish Rite ritual instead of the normal jurisdictionally approved work.
- Confirming officers are properly trained in performing the Scottish Rite degrees before opening.
- Demonstrating proficiency in exemplifying the Scottish Rite ritual during the dispensation period.
- Functioning under grand lodge obedience and standards like other lodges.

These factors present added layers of complexity in navigating both formal policies and cultural barriers toward Scottish Rite in many American jurisdictions.

Practical Benefits of the Scottish Rite Craft System Those advocating to establish Scottish Rite lodges argue it offers practical strengths that improve candidates' experience and increase member engagement. Its merits include:

- The use of dramatic allegory vividly portrays lessons and teachings through an immersive experience. The emotional impact amplifies reception of the intended messages.
- Creative costuming, set design, music, and interpersonal dynamics build energy and enthusiasm around ritual, keeping it vibrant and interesting for participants.
- More members can be actively involved in degrees through the expanded cast of officers and actors fulfilling specialized roles. This encourages wider participation.
- Incorporating structured question and answer catechism sessions builds comprehension of concepts and ideas in each degree.
- Mounting complex ritual with large teams necessitates close collaboration. Shared challenges unite members in pursuing excellence.
- Diversity of ritual allows lodges to offer options that best fit different learning styles and cultural sensibilities.

On a pragmatic level, integrating Scottish Rite ritual methodology enriches lodge culture, candidate development, member engagement, and diversity. This suggests that measured expansion of ritual pluralism in American Masonry could yield functional dividends.

Philosophical Perspectives on Unity and Diversity Among critics, resistance to Scottish Rite lodges often stems from the desire to preserve ritual uniformity for consistency. However, philosophically examining this reveals unity does not require absolute conformity.

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss posited that diversity within a society actually enriches culture through varied perspectives interrelating. Similarly, esoteric diversity may strengthen the fraternity.

Several core Masonic principles support tolerating pluralism:

- Historic Precedent – Masonry has successfully incorporated multiple compatible rites, demonstrated in places like Louisiana, Scotland, Canada and elsewhere without fracturing.

- Individual Choice – Forcing complete uniformity infringes on free will, a central Masonic tenet. Allowing personalized paths to the same truths comports with choice.

- Customized Experience – Candidates have different learning needs, so varied ritual forms permit each man to find what most resonates with him.

- Acceptance of Differences – Supporting alternate acceptable rites exercises Masonic ideals of open-mindedness and meeting on the level by validating different worldviews.

- Catalyst for Progress – New approaches prevent stagnation, stimulating reevaluation and gradual, thoughtful evolution of practices over time.

- Local Autonomy – Lodges know their cultures and needs best. Enabling flexibility respects their sovereignty.

- Pluralism Protects Truth - Homogenization risks dogma. Friendly competing philosophies check absolutism and purify understanding of principles.

This philosophical framework illustrates unity of purpose does not require absolute uniformity of method or form. Rather, diversity strengthens the search for light through varied perspectives.

Strategies for Overcoming Resistance Convincing arguments exist for expanding ritual options, but daunting institutional barriers persist. Two primary forms of resistance are prohibitive rules embedded in grand lodge law and cultural opposition from leaders invested in current norms.

Potential techniques to overcome these roadblocks include:

- Thoroughly research grand lodge codes to identify needed legislative amendments.
- Use informal conversations to gauge potential delegate support before attempting legislation.
- Seek buy-in from sympathetic grand officers to add credibility.
- Draft proposals tactfully, focusing on benefits rather than correcting flaws.
- Prepare for a prolonged multi-year process requiring persistence and iterative revisions.
- Set an example of excellence if granted dispensation to reinforce the value.
- Offer to give Scottish Rite education presentations at lodges to build understanding.

With dedicated effort and employing these approaches, advancement can be made opening grand lodges to greater diversity even when initially prohibited or doubted.

Advancing Pluralism Through Masonic Legislation If prohibitive rules exist, the vehicle to change them is Masonic legislation. The craft of navigating this governance process effectively to enact reform requires understanding and skill. Important steps include:

- Know the Forms – Each jurisdiction specifies formats for legislation. Follow all technical requirements.
- Study the Lawbook – Be familiar with existing law to properly modify it through amendments or repeal.
- Check Past Precedent – Review previous attempts to change similar policies as case studies with lessons to inform strategy.
- Draft Precisely – Legalese demands careful, narrow construction leaving no ambiguity. Consider consulting legal help.

- Share Widely – Politicking to socialize the concept before proposing is key. Gauge opinions, address concerns, build consensus.

- Find Sponsors – Having respected leaders introduce the legislation lends credibility.

- Follow Protocol – Strict rules govern introducing business in Grand Communications. Adhere to procedures.

- Make the Case – Speeches and presentations should persuasively educate on the purpose and benefits of the legislation when introduced.

- Be Ready to Compromise – If support is insufficient, temporary concessions like pilot programs or sunsetting amendments may help gain votes for passage.

With due diligence and effectively navigating protocols, obstacles encoded in grand lodge law can eventually be removed, though potentially requiring patience and iterative efforts.

Conclusion In conclusion, this research examines the complex landscape around establishing Scottish Rite craft lodges under American grand lodges. It illuminates the historical dynamics that concentrated ritual authority in the York Rite tradition, as well as more recent factors driving new openness to diversity. The constitution process for lodges is detailed, along with additional needs for Scottish Rite variant.

Arguments for the practical value and philosophical harmony of increased ritual pluralism are presented. Realistic strategies are suggested for overcoming systemic inertia and embedded resistance. And the intricacies around advocacy through Masonic legislation are reviewed.

Synthesizing these facets provides a roadmap for those endeavoring to integrate Scottish Rite ritual more extensively at the ground floor of American Masonry.

Blending international perspectives through thoughtful inclusion of diversity can strengthen the Fraternity. The lenses of history, systems, philosophy, politics, and governance reveal pathways forward.